

Understanding and Applying Basic Public Policy Concepts

Melissa Mackay, University of Guelph

Louise Shaxton, Delta Partnership

Introduction

This brief paper provides a general guide to the breadth of what we call 'policy'. Policy is often associated simply with legislation and regulation, but in reality it encompasses a wide variety of activities.

What is Policy?

A policy often comes in the form of general statements about priorities, written regulations or guidelines, procedures and/or standards to be achieved. At its simplest, policy refers to a distinct path of action which is suitable for the pursuit of desired goals within a particular context, directing the decision making of an organization or individual.

What is Public Policy?

Generally speaking public policy is what the government chooses to do, or not to do. **It is a decision made by government to either act, or not act in order to resolve a problem.** Public policy is a course of action that guides a range of related actions in a given field. They rarely tackle one problem, but rather deal with clusters of entangled and long-term problems. Public policy provides guidance to governments and accountability links to citizens. Decision making is clouded by values, rather than based purely on objective data. Most issues tend to involve deeply held values/ interests and large amounts of money, making the policy process very complex.

The [policy process](#) is a process of balancing different solutions that address the different aspects of a cluster of problems. Every policy has three key elements: a problem definition, goals to be achieved, and the [policy instruments](#) to address the problem and achieve the goals. Policy may be formal or informal: a **formal policy** might take the form of a planned policy document that has been discussed, written, reviewed, approved and published by a policymaking body. It could be a government's national plan on HIV/AIDS for example. An **informal policy** might be an ad hoc, general, unwritten but widely recognized practice or understanding within an organization that a course of action is to be followed. Even though this policy may not be made explicit in writing it still exists in practice.

Who Makes Public Policies?

Policy comes from those who have legitimate authority to impose normative guidelines for action. It is made by elected officials acting in concert with advisors from the higher levels of the administration. Government ministers are the elected officials at the apex of

government who have the right to articulate policy. Non-elected officials then are required to implement the policy through programs.

What is a Policy Framework?

A policy framework is a broad set of policies that governs the actions of groups and organizations. The broad set of policies forms a web and impacts new policy development and policy amendments. The presence or absence of a policy affects all other policies within the web (both existing and new).

What is the Public Policy Cycle?

Public policy development is an iterative process, rather than a linear one. There are five key phases which result in public policy:

1. The emergence of a problem that requires the attention of the public and decision makers.
2. Placing this problem on the government's agenda in order to find a solution.
3. The formulation of various alternatives to resolve the problem.
4. The adoption of a policy.
5. The implementation and evaluation of the policy.

In reality, the process is less orderly than this: the idea of a 'cycle' facilitates more organized thinking about policy.

Who is Involved in the Policy Cycle?

The policy cycle links a variety of key players in the policy process through their involvement with the different stages. Individuals, institutions and agencies involved in the policy process are called *actors*. Government is often thought of to be the only entity involved in policy making. Government does have the ultimate decision making and funding power, but there are many other actors that contribute to public policy, often in a network on which government relies for the delivery of complex policy goals.

- **Government:** social control of behaviour, power of coercion
- **Cabinet:** monopoly over supply of legislation, locus of power- few people make decisions
- **Public Servants:** technical knowledge and policy advice, service providers
- **Political Parties:** develop relationships in exchange for political support
- **Media:** report information to the public, generate interest, shape public opinion
- **Interest Groups:** seek to advance interests of members, can have a major influence- can force policy network to react
- **Legal system:** interpret laws, acts independently
- **Public:** elects government, forms opinions, joins interest groups and coalitions, relies on the media for information

What are Policy Instruments?

Policy instruments are techniques at the disposal of the government to implement policy objectives. After the issue/ problem is defined, tools are found to achieve the desired outcome. Examples of policy instruments used are expenditures, regulations, partnerships, exchange of information, taxation, licensing, direct provision of services, doing nothing, contracts, subsidies and authority. The purpose of policy instruments are to:

- Achieve behaviour change within individuals
- Realize social, political or economic conditions
- Provide services to the public

Government's choice of policy instruments is bound most importantly by past actions (policy instruments the current government has used in the past). Other restraints include financial, social, international and cultural pressures. The [political framework](#) may be the largest constraint. The types of policy instruments available to government include :

- **Doing nothing:** decide not to intervene. There may be no problem, financial constraints or precedents that cause the government to choose to do nothing. Or, the problem may be self-corrective
- **Information-based:** influence people through knowledge transfer, communication and moral persuasion (behaviour is based on knowledge, beliefs and values). This is the least coercive of the instruments
- **Expenditure-based:** money is used as a direct instrument to achieve outcome (grants, contributions, vouchers, etc.)
- **Regulation:** government's role is to command and prohibit - this is the most widely used instrument/ tool. It defines norms & acceptable behaviour or limits activities
- **Acting directly:** providing a direct service to achieve outcome (rather than working through citizens or organizations to achieve goals). Examples include education, garbage collection, Parks and Recreation

Policy instruments used by governments are now being influenced by:

- **Government and Governance:** financial and regulatory policy instruments are constrained within a new governance environment (increase in policy networks)
- **International Influence:** environmental policy, taxation and fiscal policy are now subject to international pressure

These put increasing emphasis on alternative policy instruments, or on policy instruments that complement traditional command and control legislation

- **Benchmarking:** setting standards for industry
- **Co-regulation:** allows for considerable industry autonomy under clearly defined parameters set out in a statutory framework. Also allows for greater flexibility and efficiency within the system while offering the same levels of protection afforded by more traditional means of regulation
- **Voluntary Codes of Conduct:** set out specific standards of conduct for how an industry will deal with its customers. Businesses voluntarily agree to uphold these standards by signing up to the code. Usually there are sanctions for businesses who breach the code, which may include: having to pay a fine, being expelled from the

industry association or having to advertise that they have breached the code and explain what they are going to do to resolve a complaint.

- Negotiated agreements: organizations follow negotiated agreements in order to stay part of the community

Recommendations to Increase the Use of Evidence in Decision Making

Learn and use 'public policy language' with policy-makers. Policy-makers do tend to use a different language. Read a variety of policy documents to get a feel for their preferred words and phrases, and for what they really mean.

Focus on effective communications to various stakeholders and target audiences. It is important to understand your target audience in order to effectively communicate with them. Use various communication channels (internet, radio, television, print, journals, conferences, etc) to convey the message in multiple ways, and reach various target audiences. Additionally, it is important to provide the information in a way that the target audience can understand and use. Use plain language to effectively communicate information to any audience from policy-maker, to the public, to a scientist. Help the audience understand why the information is important to them, and what they should do now that they know the information.

Strategically align with organizations and agencies that can get the message out in different ways. Private and not-for-profit organizations/agencies may not have the same communication restrictions as public agencies. Organizations/agencies within the policy network may be able to advocate a position in a different way in order to affect the policy agenda, another policy cycle stage, or other network member's positions. The use of visual policy networks can help in understanding the actors within the system.

Be creative and use a variety of tools available. Use new technology and communication channels to connect with the target audience. Or, use tools in a new, unexpected way in order to increase the chance that the target will pay attention to the message.

Evaluate the needs of clients. Understand how stakeholders want data, how they want to receive it, and what they want to do with it. This will increase the reach of your agency, as well as the use of research generated evidence. It is important to understand and respond to the needs of all the actors within the policy network, as each actor can affect policy.

Involve policy-makers in research planning. Policy-makers should be involved from the beginning of the research process. This is one of the KTT best practices as well.

Spend time assessing your present and ideal role (if any) in each of the stages of the policy cycle. Work out where and how you could best contribute and what impact you are likely to have. Sitting on an advisory committee could be a good way of getting into the process and understanding policy's needs and timetables.

Useful References to Understanding Public Policy

Public Health Associations as Key Players in Influencing Public Policy

<http://rhpeo.net/reviews/2007/23/index.htm#Anchor-Lemieux-48213>

Expertise and the Policy Cycle: <http://www.gdrc.org/decision/policy-cycle.pdf>

Pal, Leslie A. Beyond Policy Analysis: 3rd Edition. 2005